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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the planning of a qualitative research methodology to develop strategies to improve and expand social interaction skills of deaf-blind students in supported employment settings. Characteristics of qualitative research are delineated and include: definition of the domain of the research; an evolving study design; behavior studied within its context; primary measures obtrusive in nature; emphasis on idiographic rather than nomothetic data; obtaining descriptive information from clients; and selecting a limited sample with less emphasis on generalization. Strategies are also identified to ensure adequate internal and external validity, generalizability, reliability, and objectivity. Includes eight references. (DB)

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Improving and Expanding Social Interaction Skills in Supported Employment Settings: Planning Qualitative Research

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Running Head: Socialization and supported employment

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Abstract

The paper describes a research project studying strategies to improve and expand social interaction skills of deaf-blind students in supported employment settings with a special emphasis on the qualitative research paradigm. Several characteristics of qualitative research as related to this research project are discussed. Finally, strategies adopted to control threats to internal and external validity, generalizability, reliability, and objectivity are presented.

Improving and Expanding Social Interaction Skills in Supported Employment Settings: Planning Qualitative Research

Job success has often been a product that involves enigmatic processes, especially for students who experience handicaps in performing every day tasks. According to Chadsey-Rusch (1986), individuals must exhibit behaviors that are valued and considered appropriate in order to succeed in the work place. This requires highly developed social skills which, in turn, are heavily dependent on verbal communication (or a common language) (Hagazi, Collins, and Cobb, 1988). In this context, deaf-blind students find themselves at a distinct disadvantage in developing social interaction skills.

The purpose of this study is to implement techniques aimed at improving the "vocational fit" between the deaf-blind (visually and auditorally impaired) and his/her job setting(s). These interventions to improve vocational fit will be based on monthly ratings of the clients' videotaped social interactions and information obtained from their job coach(es) who will be providing on-the-job training to the client for the duration of this research study. Interventions for clients will be planned by an "expert team" formed for each client. This expert team will consist of the classroom teacher, job coach, cottage parent, and two supervisory personnel. Clients will be videotaped in the work setting at different times over four weeks of each month to

ensure that behavior in a variety of settings are represented. In an effort to reduce the "obtrusive" effect of videotaping, the person recording the sessions will start videotaping a month prior to the data collection phase.

Social interaction will be rated with the "Social Interaction in the Work Environment" (SIWE) and will yield time series measures on each client. The job coach will maintain a detailed description of the client's everyday performance at work. Pre- and posttest data will be obtained with the "Vocational Fit Inventory" (VFI) which requires the expert team to rate client characteristics, work environment, job requirements, and the "fit" between the client and his/her job. All ratings on the SIWE and the VFI for each client will be based on consensus reached by the expert team.

As is the case with most research studies, a major portion of the planning time was applied to developing the purpose of the study. In other words, the *domain* (Weller and Romney, 1987) of the research had to be defined. This phase is especially important for qualitative studies because it lends structure to the data collection process which, very often, can yield a large amount of unwieldy data. In the process of the development of the SIWE, this "domain" got more defined. The aspects of social interaction considered valid for the purpose of this study were limited to the type of interaction, mode of communication, person

initiating the interaction, appropriateness of response, and number of interactions occurring in a specified period of time. Thus, the design of this study *evolved* as more attention was paid to the mechanics of data collection.

Other characteristics of qualitative studies were also recognizable in this study. These included (a) studying behavior that is *not context free* in an attempt to reconstruct "social reality"; (b) primary measures being *obtrusive* in nature (i..e., the information obtained from videotaping and the job coach's field notes); (c) emphasis on the *idiographic* rather than nomothetic data, that is, a focus on the uniqueness of each client's experiences and behavior rather than attempting to explore similarities between subjects (the concern here being documentation of change in the client as a result of interventions); (d) a plan to obtain *descriptive* information on the client and the job setting and the interventions planned for each client; and (e) selection of a limited sample with less emphasis on generalization.

The last characteristic requires some clarification. The emphasis of qualitative research is *not* generalizability at the cost of rich descriptions of individual data. In the case of deaf-blind (or more specifically, auditorally and visually impaired) students, the range of disabilities is very wide and comparison between two such individuals would not be valid.

Descriptive data could, however, lend themselves to a "qualitative factor analysis" which would lead to the recognition of general trends in data. However, the validity of these interpretations would be questionable if that "intuitive leap" from data to conclusions is not verified and documented.

Guba (1981) has proposed some strategies to be followed in conducting qualitative research that could increase it's "trustworthiness" (or questions about internal and external validity, generalizability, reliability, objectivity). The concern of qualitative researchers is to obtain the whole picture and to view behavior in that context. Internal validity (or in Guba's (1981) terms, *credibility*) will be ensured by sampling interaction at different times during each month over seven months, relying on impressions of the job coach who will be present at the job site with the client, input in ratings from members of the expert team who represent knowledge of different aspects of the client's life, and videotaping behaviors and thereby making the data more available for checking and cross-checking to establish the validity of interpretations made on the basis of that data. This process, called triangulation, ensures that information about the same phenomenon is collected with different methods, thereby, lending credibility to the interpretations based on this data.

Generalizability and external validity (or *transferability*)

will be ensured by collecting detailed descriptions of the context in which behavior occurs, the client, and the interaction between the client and the context. Observer bias (according to Miles and Huberman, 1984) is another threat to generalizability in qualitative studies. This threat will be reduced by emphasizing the need for consensus among expert team members on the rating(s).

Reliability (in more general terms, *consistency*) will be obtained by keeping careful documentation of all the data collected and interventions implemented. This will ensure that variability in data can be tracked (i.e., variance can be ascribed to sources) (Guba, 1981). The regular interaction among team members will ensure that the method used to reach certain interpretations/conclusions will be dependable.

However, no amount of careful documentation will ensure the elimination of bias if no attempt is made to re-evaluate ratings and interpretations (Phillips, 1989). Other strategies to be used to eliminate this bias will be repeated (monthly) measures of behavior, and examination of the expert teams' conclusions by researchers not involved in the data collection process. Thus, attempts will be made to ensure *confirmability* (or objectivity) of research findings.

In conclusion, the planning phase of qualitative studies with low incidence populations is very crucial. It requires

knowledge about the context, the variables, and interaction between these variables. To a large extent, flexibility becomes the qualitative researcher's closest ally, allowing research designs to be modified as a result of added information about the variables affecting the research. Careful documentation accompanied with a questioning attitude can also help the researcher uncover the "truth" in the research problem being investigated.

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